

# Imperial scholars

Gifted and committed, they want to change the world.



Words: **Lucy Jolin** / Portrait photography: **Dunja Opalko**



A doctor who left school aged just nine. A mathematician determined to continue her work against the backdrop of a brutal war. A design engineer longing to gather the world's expertise. And a neuroscientist trying to unlock the secrets of dementia on a laptop so old it's falling apart. What do they have in common? All of them want to change the world – and none of them would be at Imperial had it not been for a scholarship or bursary.

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# Laurence Gesman

(Medicine, Third Year)

I was 14 – and hadn’t been to school since I was nine – when I decided I wanted to become a doctor. I became fascinated with the Ebola epidemic and read everything I could find about it. But I was living with my father, who had not taken good care of me. I had no qualifications and no education.

Three years later, when I was 17, I left my father and went into care. But I was still determined to follow a career in medicine. Throughout all the adversity and disadvantage I faced, that dream was what drove me on. I went to sixth form college and took the GCSEs I needed, then the A-levels. It was hard work. When I got the offer from Imperial, it made all the effort worth it – but being awarded the Imperial Bursary made it possible.

As a care leaver, I receive £5,000 a year – the UK’s most generous bursary. Having the bursary has meant, for example, that I can join the rowing team – the first time I’ve ever been able to join a sports team in my life. It’s helped me with housing costs, so I didn’t have to work so much over the summer. So having the bursary has been very important to me.

**Throughout all the adversity and disadvantage I faced, that dream was what drove me on.**

The more I study, and the more clinical exposure I get, the more I know that medicine is what I want to do. I’ve never made friends like the friends I’ve made on my course. I’m in such a great place with my life, thanks to doing medicine with people who have similar ambitions, and who want to do good things in the world. Right now, I’m considering going into oncology and cancer research – but that may change, as I’m discovering new things every day!

Bursaries like this are so important, as they open up the medical profession to people like me. But, of course, the Imperial Bursary isn’t just for medics, it’s for any student at Imperial who fits the criteria. It means we can be part of this ambitious, visionary community – and we can worry a lot less and do a lot more.



Laurence Gesman on the corner of Cromwell Road in front of the Natural History Museum.

# Rasin Wurie

(MSc Applied Biosciences and Biotechnology 2023)



Rasin Wurie outside South Kensington Tube Station, where he grabs food after studies.

I've always been fascinated by the brain, the nervous system, and understanding the biological functions that make us who we are. That's why I chose to study neuroscience at the University of St Andrews in Scotland where I became interested in neurodegeneration, and especially how it can affect so many different parts of the nervous system, from memory to movement. That led me to the exciting emerging fields of bioinformatics and synthetic biology – and to Imperial's DeepMind Scholarship.

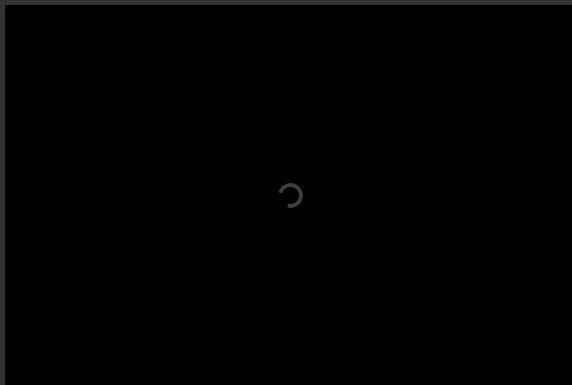
When I heard that I had won the scholarship, I just felt ecstatic, because I know how stressful it is when you're trying to study under financial pressure. I had to work part time throughout my undergraduate degree and had just enough to cover my rent and basic living costs. Knowing that I wouldn't have to worry, and could just focus on the science and my studies, was an amazing relief. The scholarship not only covers the full course and living costs, but also support for equipment – my ancient laptop was literally falling apart! – and conference attendance. I was able to attend the British Neuroscience Association's conference in Brighton, which was fantastic: it gave me the chance to network with leading figures in neuroscience and learn more about advances in the field. Plus, it was inspiring seeing just how science happens and is communicated.

**When I heard I had won the DeepMind Scholarship I felt ecstatic – knowing that I could just focus on the science was amazing.**

What I've loved most about my Imperial experience is engaging with people from different backgrounds and scientific disciplines and seeing how they approach a problem. I'm passionate about how interdisciplinary research can be used to advance science. In the future, I want to do a PhD exploring the genetic basis of neural degeneration, looking at understanding the causes and progression or identifying targets for treatments. And beyond that? Perhaps to go further into the question of whether ageing is a natural process or a form of disease. But above all, I want to do solid, useful research that will help improve lives.

# Oksana Vertsimakha

(MSc Statistics 2023)



Oksana Vertsimakha standing by the Serpentine in Hyde Park, where she enjoys hanging out.

I took my undergraduate and Master's degrees in Mathematics and Statistics at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. But I really wanted to pursue my academic career and study abroad. I was eager to experience an international scientific community and international-level research. So I applied to Imperial to do a second Master's, and was accepted.

Then the war broke out. It was a very hard decision to continue studying, but I believed that as a researcher I would still be able to make the most of my abilities and life. It was already difficult arranging to study abroad: there were many administrative issues. But now, I couldn't even get a student visa, as there were no visa centres operating in Ukraine. I just kept looking for a way and hoping. Luckily, I was accepted on to the British government's Ukrainian sponsorship scheme, which allowed me to come to the UK, and I was awarded Imperial's Sanctuary Scholarship – it felt like a miracle.

**I am so grateful to those kind people who donate to scholarships like Sanctuary, making it possible for me to contribute to research.**

I have loved studying at Imperial. It has been fantastic to see such a high level of research going on, and to meet so many people involved in pandemic studies and biomedical research. But, of course, it has been a stressful year for me. Being able to live in London and not having to work in order to keep afloat has been wonderful. And I have had the opportunity to sing in the Imperial choir, volunteer, and to explore this great city. Having the Sanctuary Scholarship has been very reassuring for me in very difficult times.

Now, I have been offered an academic scholarship. I am about to start my PhD at Imperial, and I'm so excited about staying connected to the College in the future. I'm hoping to stay in academia, focusing on biomedical or environmental statistics. I am so grateful to those exceptionally kind people who donate to scholarships such as Sanctuary, who make it possible for people like me to contribute to scientific research.





Oksana studied at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and applied to Imperial to do a second Master's.

When war broke out, she struggled to get a student visa in Ukraine but was later accepted on to the British government's Ukrainian sponsorship scheme and awarded Imperial's Sanctuary Scholarship.







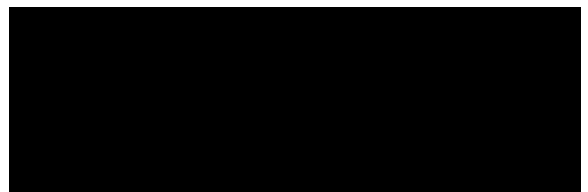
Cassandra Seah

(PhD Design Engineering, Fourth Year)

Cassandra studied Product Design at Nanyang Technological  
University in Singapore and hoped to go on to study at Imperial.

Cassandra's dream was realised when she was awarded the President's PhD Scholarship.

When my beloved grandpa was diagnosed with dementia, I wanted to do something to help him. I was studying Product Design at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and doing undergraduate research on dementia games. Realising that such interventions could be improved, I set up a company to create multisensory rehabilitative games and installations aimed at





enhancing the lives of seniors with dementia in nursing homes, hospitals and day care centres.

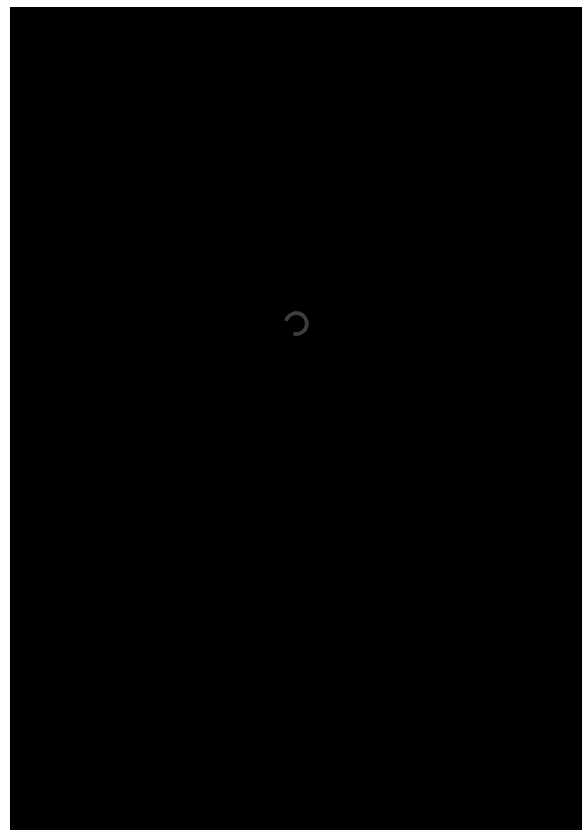
Wanting to research and develop interventions for people like my grandfather, I hoped to study at Imperial. However, it was extremely expensive, but my dream was realised when I was awarded the President's PhD Scholarship.

I realised that mindfulness could bring benefits to both the caregiver and the person with dementia, and I wanted to bring them some form of comfort and reduce their stress and worries. As both go through each stage of the disease, it is demoralising on the emotional, intellectual and physical level, with more challenging and extremely stressful, uncertain situations to cope with.

So for my PhD, I've developed innovative interventions, using conversational agents such as Alexa to bring mindfulness to dementia patients and their caregivers. I have worked alongside them for the past four years, and developed five mindfulness activities, carefully designed to consider content, difficulty level, diction, tone, flow and resulting experience.

**Without the President's Scholarship, I would not have had the opportunity to go deeper into this work.**

It's been an eye-opening experience to be exposed to so many different cultures and, at the same time, find so many like-minded people to connect with. I made so many close and dear friends who I speak to every day, even though I'm now back in Singapore. Without the President's Scholarship, I would not have had the opportunity to go deeper into this work, which I believe will add to the growing field of improving the lives of persons living with dementia, and their caregivers.



Cassandra Seah, who is writing her thesis in Singapore, outside the Thian Hock Keng Temple with her golden doodle.

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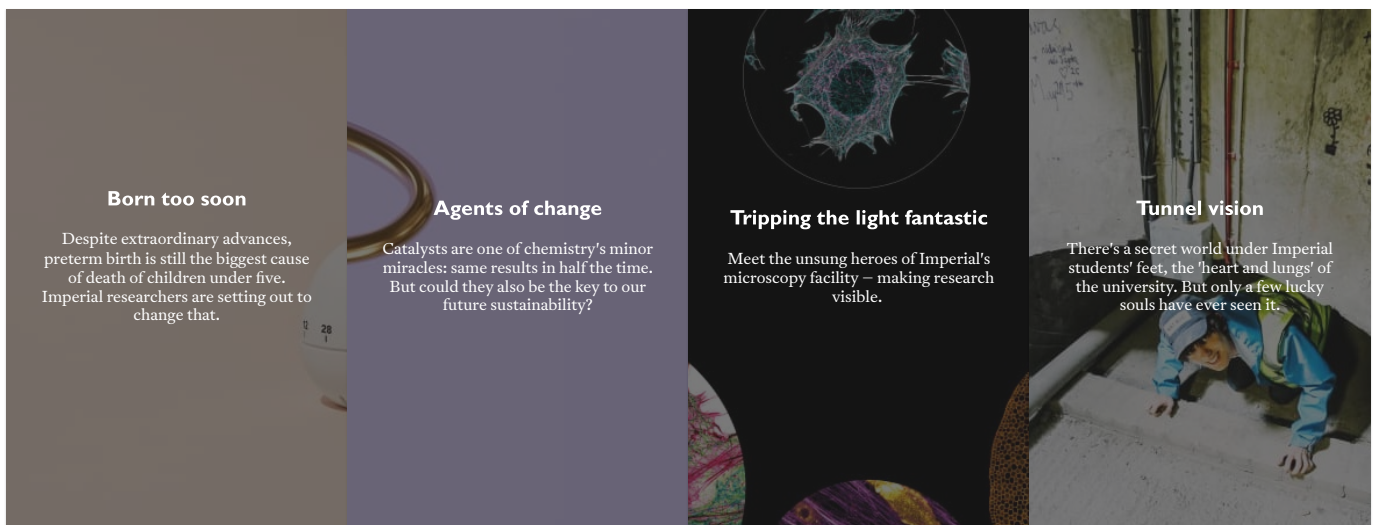
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